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Nicaraguan Recants, Denies Ties With Cuba

U.S. Embarrassed as Soldier Reverses Story at News Conference

By ROBERT C. TOTH,
Times Staff Writer

WASHINGTON—A young Nicaraguan soldier captured in El Salvador embarrassed the United States here Friday by retracting, at a State Department press conference, his earlier public statement about Cuban, Ethiopian and Nicaraguan support for Salvadoran leftist guerrillas.

Orlando Jose Tardencillas Espinosa, 19, who repeatedly spoke of his "proletarian" convictions in fighting what he called Salvadoran "fascists," insisted that his original statement—made in February, 1981—had been made "under coercion" after he had suffered "criminal torture."

"We Were Taking a Chance"

His appearance Friday was a sharp setback for the Administration's effort to convince the public and Congress that the Salvadoran rebels are armed by and commanded from Nicaragua with the help of Cuban President Fidel Castro's Communist government.

State Department spokesman Dean Fischer said later that during Tardencillas' 14 months of captivity in El Salvador, "he had consistently maintained that he was a Nicaraguan soldier who, after demobilization, had been recruited by the Nicaragua Solidarity Committee (a government group) to go to El Salvador as a fighter" and that he had received training abroad.

"When we decided to make him available to the press today, we

knew we were taking a chance," Fischer said. "He has either lied (earlier) . . . or he lied to the press today. . . . However he changed his story today, he did confirm that as a Nicaraguan, he had commanded guerrilla forces in El Salvador."

The press conference was in Fischer's office with a State Department interpreter translating the remarks that Tardencillas delivered in Spanish—a recital that was interspersed with attacks on the United States. State Department officials made no attempt to interrupt him.

"Obviously we didn't program him," Fischer said with some chagrin.

There apparently is no way to prove Tardencillas' original claims that he traveled for training to Ethiopia, Honduras and Cuba, according to two senior U.S. officials.

Before his public appearance, Tardencillas had been screened since Tuesday by "a string of people" at the State Department and the Central Intelligence Agency, one official said. "He conned them all," the official added.

"What a ridiculous farce," another official said. "All our intelligence proves that Nicaragua is supplying arms and running the show in El Salvador, so why do we need a 19-year-old kid with a year-old story to confirm it? Instead of confirmation, we've got egg all over our face."

Whichever one of his stories is correct, Tardencillas emerged as a bold, nervous but articulate man. He now faces the considerable wrath of the Salvadoran government if he is returned to San Salvador.

'Death One of Risks'

"I am very conscious of what awaits me," the Nicaraguan said. "I am a revolutionary and one of the risks is death, I am willing to accept it."

The State Department said the Nicaraguan had been "parolled"

into U.S. custody for the trip here but remained a Salvadoran prisoner. It said no decision had been made about his future.

Tardencillas is a short, dark man, with thick hair and tortoise shell-framed glasses. He wore an obviously new pair of blue jeans and a V-necked, fleecy white pullover. During the hourlong press conference, he smoked a cigarette and sipped water.

Last Year's Name

He said he was born in Masaya, Nicaragua, and had attended the national university for one year. Thereafter, he said he served in the Sandinista military movement that overthrew the regime of Anastasio Somoza.

In his Feb. 24, 1981, press conference in San Salvador shortly after his capture by the Salvadorans, he was identified as a Nicaraguan lieutenant with a slightly different name—Orlando Tardencillas Espin-

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